

Political documentary, YouTube and the 2008 US presidential election: Focus on Robert Greenwald and David N. Bossie

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Abstract

This essay investigates elements of the changing media landscape between the 2004 and the 2008 US presidential elections, focusing on the audio-visual works of two prominent independent organizations: Robert Greenwald's Brave New Films and David Bossie's Citizens United. After Kerry's defeat in 2004, Greenwald's organization gradually shifted from its production of political documentaries such as Uncovered: The Truth About the War in Iraq to a heavy reliance on YouTube and video campaigns such as "The Real McCain." Citizens United, stung by the success of the numerous liberal-left documentaries of 2004 (by Greenwald, Michael Moore and others), produced a number of documentaries in 2008 including Hillary: The Movie and Hype: The Obama Effect, but put little energy into exploiting video streaming, video sharing and related technologies. Although Brave New Films videos were widely viewed on the Internet and played a significant role in the campaign, the flourishing of music videos on YouTube – over 1,000 embracing "hope" and expressing a pro-Obama sentiment – was arguably the most unexpected and a highly influential dimension of the 2008 campaign season.

Keywords

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Given that feature-length political documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Robert Greenwald's *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the War in Iraq* played such a prominent role in the 2004 US presidential election, many interested observers expected a wave of similar activities in 2008. After all, Michael Moore had announced his intention to unveil *Fahrenheit 9/11* and $\frac{1}{2}$ during the next electoral cycle (Rashbaum 2008). Despite such expectations, election-related feature-length documentaries did not achieve the same prominence – commercially or politically. What happened – and why? Although a different political situation was one important factor, the documentary's position in the always-shifting media landscape was obviously crucial. The new 'new media' of the last decade has involved a nexus of rapidly evolving technological innovations built around digital formats, the Internet and wireless communication capabilities. These unstable configurations may have favoured certain kinds of documentary at one time, but subsequently put them at a disadvantage. By considering the interplay of the political and the technological forces, we can better understand the

1. Robert Greenwald's work in political documentary is the focus of several recent articles. See in particular, Christensen (2009), and articles in Benson (2008).
2. <http://bravenewfilms.org/about/>. Accessed 28 July 2009.
3. <http://www.citizensunited.org/>. Accessed 28 July 2009. Greenwald and Bossie have occasionally been linked (see for instance, Parns (2008); see also, Harkinson (2007).

trajectory of political documentaries in the last several elections. Obviously, this has not been a simple, linear history, and it has involved both broad-based trends and choices by specific individuals – who sometimes acted in contradictory ways.

Since an adequate investigation of this move from the 2004 to the 2008 elections would be a massive undertaking, two individuals and their affiliated organizations are foregrounded in this essay: Robert Greenwald and David N. Bossie. Greenwald, who produced and directed several high-profile documentaries during the 2004 election, was widely hailed as an innovative media maven by the left for his development of ground-breaking methods of distribution and exhibition.¹ He went on to establish Brave New Films, which is 'at the forefront of the fight to create a just America'.² Bossie has been the president of Citizens United, a conservative non-profit organization 'dedicated to restoring our Government to Citizen Control'.³ Although Citizens United had produced media content for political campaigns for two decades, Bossie became involved in the making of feature-length political documentaries in 2004, and has remained active in making documentaries geared towards subsequent elections.

The conjunction of documentary and democratic elections has an uneven, even rocky, history in the United States. Although there has been a long succession of campaign films, these generally focused on specific candidates and were typically sponsored by the candidates' campaign organizations or political parties, often for use during the nominating convention (Morreale 1993). Few were by independent film-makers, a group that has been traditionally constituted as a liberal-left formation. Indeed, the rarity of this conjunction is worth noting. During the Vietnam War, for instance, film-makers such as Emile de Antonio displayed indifference to the electoral process: his Vietnam documentary *In the Year of the Pig* was copyrighted a few days before the 1968 presidential election and not released until the following year, once Nixon had taken office. De Antonio's *Millhouse: A White Comedy*, a satirical look at President Richard Nixon, was released in 1971. Although it was certainly shown during the 1972 presidential election in revival houses and through non-theatrical distribution, its actual effectiveness was quite limited (as Nixon's re-election would suggest).

Reviewing the elections of 2002, 2004, 2006

A new and particularly rich conjunction between documentary and electoral politics developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The questionable legitimacy of George W. Bush's electoral victory and the policies that his administration pursued in the wake of 9/11 were crucial to the emergence of this new formation in 2002 with Danny Schechter's *Counting on Democracy* (2002) and a Robert Greenwald Presentation of Joan Sekler and Richard Ray Pérez's *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election* (2002). These films focused on the ways in which Bush had won the 2000 election through the manipulation of the voting process backed by judicial favouritism. The film-makers engaged these issues hoping to have some impact on the 2002 Congressional elections. Greenwald, an experienced Hollywood producer-director with a respectable, but not

extraordinary track record, was one of the two executive producers on *Unprecedented*, fostering the process of post-production, distribution and promotion.⁴ As he later recalled, '*Unprecedented* began with Joan Sekler and Richard Perez coming to me with paper bags filled with tapes they had shot in Florida. I was shocked when they told me that no one else was doing a film on Florida. So began my introduction to the joys of documentaries!' (Greenwald 2009). The 50-minute film premiered at Miami's Lyric Theater on 17 September 2002, and went on to screen at more than a dozen film festivals and a number of high-profile political events in the six weeks before the election. Nonetheless, most reviews for *Unprecedented* appeared after the 2002 election, and although these were quite favourable, since the film was not feature length, they were also quite short (Thomas 2003, Klein 2002).⁵ The documentary changed the trajectory of Greenwald's film-making career, but its limited distribution and impact (Republicans, who already controlled the House, took the Senate) provided the film-maker with issues to ponder as he looked towards the 2004 election.

The intervention of independent documentary into the politically charged landscape of elections was as tentative in 2002 as the digital revolution. DVD technology was still in its ascendancy: it was only in June 2003 that DVD rentals finally exceeded those of video cassettes (Bakalis 2003). By the 2004 election, the new media configuration was far more advanced, although moving image media was not quite ready to be streamed, nor was it widely or easily downloadable from the Internet. By that date the technical quality of video production had greatly improved even as post-production costs were radically reduced. Feature-length documentaries were being shot and edited digitally, typically transferred to 35mm and put into theatres. The post-production process could be condensed and the 'film' reworked until the moment of release – and then further updated in response to unfolding events. With the increasingly agile Internet, websites and online retailers were used to sell programmes directly to consumers at a modest cost. When these were combined with affordable two-day or overnight shipping, documentary enjoyed new and much broader forms of distribution and reception. DVDs had become a pervasive feature of this new configuration (though the shift from videocassettes to DVDs was still not complete in 2004), and facilitated a dynamic interaction between websites and the documentary culture. The documentary tradition flourished as numerous documentaries appeared in commercial theatres, received media attention and then quickly moved to a broader release on DVD. New communication technologies made possible an array of innovative practices.⁶

Independent documentary flourished during the 2004 election. Both *Unprecedented* and *Counting on Democracy* were updated and re-released on DVD. Most documentaries, however, were directly or indirectly related to the Iraq War, which had begun on 20 March 2003. Only ten days after the US-led invasion, Michael Moore announced his next documentary project – entitled *Fahrenheit 911* (the slash in his title would be added later). 'The primary thrust of the new film is what has happened to the country since Sept. 11, and how the Bush administration

4. For a list of Greenwald's credits before *Unprecedented*, see <http://us.imdb.com/name/nm0339254>.
5. Peter Keough, <http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/movies/trailers/ments/03284770.asp>.
6. I have previously undertaken a fuller sketch of specific election-related documentary practices in 2004. See Musser (2007).

7. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/art/?id=documentary.htm>.
8. <http://action.moveon.org/meet/parties.html>. Accessed 1 May 2005.

used this tragic event to push its agenda', Moore explained (Fleming 2003). As we know, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) received an unprecedented reception and broke all box-office records for documentary with a domestic gross of over \$119 million.⁷ It was not the first documentary on the war, however: Robert Greenwald produced and directed *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War*, which focuses on the central issues that took the United States to war in Iraq. Sponsor MoveOn.org promoted the film as 'The story of how Truth became the first American casualty in Iraq'.⁸ Greenwald went on to produce and direct *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), which examined the FOX channel's advocacy of right-wing views despite its claim to be 'Fair and Balanced', and *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (2004), the longer, updated and theatrical version of his 2003 achievement with a similar name. Greenwald also served as the executive producer of Nonny de la Peña's *Unconstitutional – The War On Our Civil Liberties* (released in October 2004) – which became part of the 'Un trilogy' with *Unprecedented* and *Uncovered*.

Greenwald pioneered a number of innovative ways to get his work seen and discussed. Film festivals were incidental to this approach. The 56-minute *Uncovered: The Truth About the War in Iraq* was too short for most theatrical venues but ideally suited for showings in small gatherings because its length left time for discussion. On 7 December 2003, for instance, the Internet-based MoveOn.org organized more than 2600 house parties across the country so that people could come together to see the documentary in private or semi-private spaces. Later, when the expanded, updated feature *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* was released theatrically, the documentary was effectively pre-sold. Likewise, *Outfoxed* was widely distributed on DVD before its theatrical debut – a reverse platform that proved surprisingly effective.

On the political right, pro-Bush film-makers generally played catch up. They created a number of election-related documentaries, which were less well made, received less attention from the press, and drew much smaller audiences. Several advocated for the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, including David Wald's *Buried in the Sand: The Deception of America* (2004) and *Voices of Iraq* (2004), which was purportedly 'filmed and directed by the people of Iraq'. Several were quickly made as challenges to Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, including Alan Peterson's *FahrenHYPE 9/11: Unravelling the Truth About Fahrenheit 9/11 & Michael Moore* and Kevin Knoblock's *Celsius 41.11: The Temperature at Which the Brain Begins to Die* (2004), which boasted the tagline: 'The Truth behind the Lies of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'. The latter, produced by Citizens United with David Bossie as one of its two executive producers, was not so much a critique of Moore's documentary as a rambling expression of outrage at Moore and the anti-war position.

Although Republican operatives did not make particularly successful feature documentaries in 2004, they did create the media materials that had the most decisive impact on the outcome of the election: the TV spots by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (a group that later became 'Swift Vets and POWs for Truth'), which challenged John Kerry's war record and his patriotism. These were broadcast in Ohio and other swing states

and were posted online as the election came to an end. Carlton Sherwood later made a feature-length documentary for the same group on the same subject: *Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal* (2004). George Butler's powerful biography of Kerry, *Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry* (2004), effectively rebutted the Swift Boat ads. Similarly, Danny Schechter's *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception* (2004) investigated the media's coverage of the US invasion of Iraq, and found it to be cheerleading more than news coverage. These anti-Bush or pro-Kerry documentaries were impressive and generated cultural prestige, but they were shown in the closing weeks of the campaign, were not widely seen, and had little impact on the election.

With documentary having played such an influential and prestigious role during the 2004 election, it is not surprisingly that both Greenwald and Bossie looked toward the 2006 off-term elections with feature-length film-making in mind. Bossie's background sheds some useful light on these activities. A long-time political operative for the Republican Party, Bossie was a protégé of Floyd Brown, who founded Citizens United in 1988. Brown is perhaps best known for creating the racially charged Willie Horton television ad that fatally damaged the candidacy of Michael Dukakis in his 1988 presidential race against George H. W. Bush.⁹ For the 1992 campaign Brown wrote '*Slick Willie: Why America Cannot Trust Bill Clinton*', for which Bossie provided much of the research. Bossie's research was subsequently used for the 85-minute documentary *The Clinton Chronicles: An Investigation into the Alleged Criminal Activities of Bill Clinton*, released in June 1994. Bossie was soon employed as an investigator for Republican Senator, Lauch Faircloth, on the Special Committee to investigate the Whitewater Development Corporation and then served as chief investigator for the United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. In 1998, he released highly manipulated documents designed to undermine the Clintons and was quickly fired (or resigned) as a result. Two years later Bossie succeeded Brown as president of Citizens United (Brown became chairman of the board) (Center for Media and Democracy 2009).

In February and March 2003 Bossie and Citizens United launched a 'pro-war' television advertising campaign featuring former, Senator Fred Thompson, then playing the district attorney on *Law & Order*. For the 2004 election Bossie published *The Many Faces of John Kerry*, an anti-Kerry book, and produced Kevin Knoblock's *Celsius 41.11*. In explaining the film's rather odd title, Bossie remarked that 'Michael Moore, MoveOn.org., and their ilk have built up so much heat, through hatred, anger and rage, that they're not thinking rationally, which led us to the movie's title [...]'.¹⁰ Bossie had caught the film bug, and so Citizens United continued its documentary film-making activities with Bossie producing *Broken Promises: The United Nations at 60* (2005), which Knoblock wrote and directed.

Bossie's documentary for the 2006 election was *Border War: The Battle Over Illegal Immigration*, with Knoblock having chief creative responsibility. It premiered on 31 August 2006, in Los Angeles, where it was given a week-long run. The film-makers sought to energize voters

9. http://www.source-watch.org/index.php?title=Floyd_G._Brown

10. 'Citizens United to Premiere "Celsius 41.11 – the Temperature at Which the Brain Begins to Die"; Documentary Challenges Lies in "Fahrenheit 9/11", Deconstructs John Kerry', Business Wire, 16 September 2004, http://www.businesswire.com/portal/site/e/?ndmViewId=news_view&newsId=20040916005456&newsLang=en. Accessed 28 July 2009.

11. For information on the Minutemen, see their website, <http://minutemanproject.com>. Accessed 5 August 2009.

with an anti-immigrant viewpoint. In this regard, Mark Olsen of the *Los Angeles Times* found it ineffective, concluding:

As rhetoric, 'Border War' is scattershot and anecdotal, featuring an awful lot of talking but surprisingly little for a viewer to latch onto besides a transmitted sense of general anxiety and outrage, and an insistence that an unspecified 'something' must be done to solve this 'problem'.

(Olsen 2006)

When the documentary subsequently played in San Diego, Tanya Mannes of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* reported, 'Cheered on by a standing-room-only audience in an AMC Mission Valley 20 theater Wednesday night, the film described the porous border as a problem 'that no one wants to talk about' (Mannes 2006). Yet because the film offered few solutions other than stricter enforcement of existing laws, many audience members were dissatisfied. Larry Green, a member of the Minutemen vigilante group who attended the screening, felt that the film 'didn't go far enough' (Mannes 2006).¹¹ Meanwhile,

Felix Garcia, who was in the audience, said he crossed the border illegally 20 years ago and now is a U.S. citizen. He described the documentary as unbalanced.

'He speak only bad things about us,' Garcia, a salesman, said. 'It was offensive for me.'

(Mannes 2006)

The documentary had a number of two-day theatrical runs in southern and western cities during the 2006 electoral season and was released on DVD on 10 October. Bossie frequently used media to scare his audience into voting Republican – a tactic that Karl Rove had used successfully to get Bush elected – and re-elected. The Republicans' defeat in the 2006 mid-term elections only seemed to further energize Bossie. Rather than reflect on the efficacy of his approach, Bossie was determined to hone his style.

Greenwald also continued to make feature-length documentaries after the 2004 election, but he conceived of them as operating within a much broader media environment. In February 2005, he wrote an e-mail to supporters:

It's been four months since the November election – enough time now to have some perspective on it. [...] I am working with some of my colleagues from *Outfoxed* and *Uncovered* [...] to create a new media company that will continue to do films, but also much more [...] We will create a radically new and expanded internet presence, and will continue our innovative distribution methods – some old, some new, on the cutting edge.

(Greenwald 2005)

Greenwald had started a blog and a revamped website that included videos at http://www.robertgreenwald.org/shorts/shorts_progma_j_qhi.php. In January he made a one-minute television advertisement, *The People Speak: Nurses*, which challenged Governor Schwarzenegger's attack on nurses as

a 'special interest' (PR Newswire 2005). By the end of February, he had put *The People Speak: Nurses* on the web. Other videos followed. He also announced that he was looking for a name for the new company, which soon became Brave New Films.

YouTube was being developed in the early months of 2005 and had its official launch that November. On 26 April 2006, Brave New Films started a YouTube 'channel' and posted its first video: the 2:57 (minutes:seconds) *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers – teaser trailer*. The video announced Greenwald's new documentary project about war profiteers and asked for donations. It subsequently received just over 14,000 viewings. Greenwald's appeal for funding was successful and on 4 May, the documentary producer wrote his supporters:

We are stunned, energized and very moved by your outpouring of generosity to help make 'Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers.' In the last eight days, you democratized film and political story telling. It's quite remarkable.

Overall, we raised \$347,094, just blasting through our \$300,000 goal! 2,701 of you contributed an average of \$60. Because of that momentum, two large donors pushed us over the top: Erika Glazer and Dick Mazess who champions many great causes, most notably VotersForPeace.us. All of the money will be put to use specifically for this film, both for production and now with some funds to help with outreach, education and distribution.

But first we have to make the movie [...] so filming starts next week!

(Greenwald 2006a)

Of course, the vast majority of donors came through Greenwald's well-developed list of supporters who received e-mail announcements. For the moment YouTube was just a promising possibility.

By June 2006 YouTube subscribers were uploading more than 65,000 videos a day, while the site was generating 100 million video viewings per day (USA Today 2006). June was also a turning point for Brave New Films' association with YouTube as Brave New Films began to upload a large number of trailers or promotion videos for its long-form documentaries, including *A Suicide Economy* and *Bill O'Reilly smears Robert Greenwald. Again!* for *Walmart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005), which had been released the previous November.¹²

When *Iraq for Sale* was released in late September 2006, Brave New Films posted several promotional videos on YouTube, including the 5:54 *Blackwater, America's Private Army*, uploaded on 1 September and viewed over 830,000 times, and *'Iraq for Sale' Plugged on MSNBC*, uploaded on 26 September¹³ Soon Greenwald could announce:

Over 4,000 screenings [of *Iraq for Sale*] have been planned and more are coming in every day – all made possible by you calling friends, emailing your lists, organizing events and spreading the word.

MoveOn members organized over 1500 *Iraq the Vote* screening parties where they watched the film and made over 200,000 calls to voters in their continuing volunteer phone banking efforts. Hundreds of groups, from Democracy for America to Amnesty International, from Campaign for

12. *A Suicide Economy* (6:37), posted 7 June 2006 by bravenewfilms, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU6I53g_X1s, 58,616 views when accessed 8 August 2009; *Bill O'Reilly smears Robert Greenwald. Again!* (1:36), posted 8 June 2006 by bravenewfilms, 19,298 views when accessed 8 August 2009; <http://www.walmartmovie.com/about.php>. Accessed 8 August 2009.

13. *Blackwater, America's Private Army*, YouTube, 830,468 viewings when accessed (25 March 2009); *'Iraq for Sale' plugged on MSNBC*, YouTube, 5136 viewings when accessed (12 July 2009).

'Iraq for Sale' plugged on MSNBC featured Cliff Scheter, then a member of the Brave New Films team.

14. 'Hillary the Movie!', http://www.dickmorris.com/blog/?page_id=237. Accessed 7 July 2009.

15. 'Hillary the Movie Trailer', YouTube, uploaded by citizen-sunited07 on 20 December 2007. This 2:30 (mins:secs) promo had 244,875 views when accessed (7 July 2009).

16. McCain (2008): The 63-minute *Hillary! Uncensored: Banned by the Media*, another anti-Hillary movie, was completed 7 November 2007, <http://www.equaljusticeproductions.com/servlet/StoreFront>. Accessed 30 July 2009).

America's Future to Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility and Code Pink all had screenings.

(Greenwald 2006b)

Iraq for Sale received extensive media coverage as it examined the Bush–Cheney government's conduct of the Iraq War. Drew Tillman of the *Village Voice* characterized the film as 'a trenchant indictment of war profiteering in Iraq and a memorial for those not included in the military's death toll'. *Iraq for Sale*, he concluded, 'is a much needed reminder of the criminal negligence of those who led the troops into this mess and those who have gotten rich off of it' (Tillman 2006).

Citizens United and the 2008 election

Citizens United and David Bossie produced a number of feature-length documentaries for use during the 2008 election season. In this respect, Bossie was determined that conservatives would avoid the mistakes of 2004. His approach was two-fold: to make documentaries attacking the Democratic candidate(s) for president and to make documentaries that took up issues that were important to the conservative movement. The most important jobs went to Alan Peterson, who first produced and directed an all-out attack on Hillary Clinton: *Hillary: The Movie* (2008). Peterson worked with many of the people from *FahrenHYPE 9/11*, including Dick Morris, Lee Troxler, Ann Coulter and Frank Gaffney. Morris subsequently promoted the film on his webpage:

NOW, MORE THAN EVER, YOU NEED TO KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT HILLARY CLINTON:

- What is her program. What would she do as President?
- How did she avoid indictment for her past scandals?
- What did her brothers get in return for Bill's pardons?
- What did she really do to make \$100,000 in the futures market?
- How did she use campaign finance fraud to win election to the Senate?
- What has she really done as Senator?¹⁴

Hillary: The Movie is a remarkably intense effort at character assassination. A promo for the documentary, posted on YouTube in December 2007, excerpted some representative sound bits. Dick Morris says 'She's deceitful. She'll make up any story, lie about anything as long as it serves her purpose of the moment'. Peter F. Paul declares, 'I can't think of any other politician in history who has shown such a disrespect and a contempt for the constitution and the rule of law as Hillary. And I represented Richard Nixon's best friend and I knew Richard Nixon. And I'll tell you something: she's no Richard Nixon, she's worse'.¹⁵ But then Paul is a convicted felon with a long history of fraud – something Peterson's film fails to mention. In general, the film repeatedly suggests that Hillary was Bill Clinton's 'Nixon – his evil equivalent'.

A 90-minute documentary with excellent production values and stylistic flourishes, *Hillary: The Movie* had its theatrical premiere at the Georgetown Loews Theater in Washington, DC, on 14 January, by which time it was already available for sale as a DVD.¹⁶ Citizens United then

arranged a series of one-off theatrical screenings in other cities: Tampa Bay on 23 January; New York City on 24 January; Phoenix on 30 January; San Diego on 1 February; Santa Ana, CA, on 2 February; Seattle on 11 February; and Orlando, FL, on 4 March. It was posted on YouTube on 26 February 2008 with the slogan 'Learn the shocking truth about Hillary Clinton before you VOTE!!!' (Peterson 2008). Bossie also wrote *Hillary: The Politics of Personal Destruction* as a 'companion book' to the film (hardbacks included a DVD of the documentary) – with a March 2008 publication date.

To say that *Hillary: The Movie* was made for political purposes is to state the obvious. Part of the producers' strategy was to use television advertisements for theatrical screenings and DVD sales to attack Clinton herself, along the lines of the Swift Boat ads that had undermined Kerry's candidacy. Of course, many more people would see these TV spots than the documentary. This plan, however, was blocked by the courts. A three-judge panel concluded, 'The film does not address legislative issues and was produced solely to inform the electorate that Senator Clinton is unfit for office, that the United States would be a dangerous place in a President Hillary Clinton world, and that viewers should vote against her' (*New York Times* 2008, Media Matters 2008). In short it had to be treated as a political advertisement with disclaimers and a revelation of its funders. The original YouTube trailer for the film, uploaded in December 2007, did not face the same problems and was eventually viewed approximately 240,000 times.¹⁷ If nothing else, *Hillary: the Movie* contributed to the level of unease about Clinton's past, echoing (and perhaps even encouraging?) the frequent anti-Hillary op-ed essays by liberal columnist, Maureen Dowd, of the *New York Times*. Assuming Democrats were listening, perhaps Peterson's documentary even helped Obama.

Even as *Hillary: The Movie* was having its theatrical premiere, Bossie announced that they were already researching a documentary on Obama, in case the Illinois senator won the Democratic nomination. The resulting *Hype: The Obama Effect* premiered in Denver, Colorado, on 24 August – in the shadow of the Democratic National Convention that Denver hosted from 24 to 29 August (*Rocky Mountain News* 2008). (Bossie clearly enjoys this kind of in-one's-face, mischievous behaviour, which might be considered clever or at least audacious.) The second theatrical screening occurred 2 weeks later in Minneapolis, during the Republican National Convention. At this event, 'David Bossie urged the audience to take free DVDs of the film and show it to friends back home. He offered to help anyone wanting to put on a show in a local church or veterans hall' (Harris 2008). Although Bossie saw the documentary as an effort 'to inform and educate the American public', a reporter for *The Guardian* (UK) characterized it as 'a relentless 2 h of Republican attacks on Obama's character and politics' (Harris 2008). The film's title echoes two of McCain's attack ads, *Celeb* (32 s) and *The One* (1: 14), which suggest that the true Obama – a dangerous radical – is hidden underneath this aura of charismatic celebrity.¹⁸ As the head title for *Hype* begins, former Conservative Republican Illinois State Senator Patrick O'Malley (whose party and politics are never identified) declares that Obama is 'not either left or right, he's a radical'. Somewhat later former Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell suggests he is an

17. *Hillary the Movie Trailer*, YouTube, uploaded by citizen-sunited07 on 20 December 2007. This 2:30 (mins:secs) promo had 244,875 views when accessed (7 July 2009).
18. *Celeb*, uploaded 30 July 2008 by JohnMcCaindotcom, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHXYSw_ZDXg, viewed 2,258,844 times when accessed (15 April 2009) and *The One*, uploaded 1 August 2008 by JohnMcCaindotcom, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mopkn0LPzM8>, viewed 1,719,163 times when accessed (15 April 2009).

19. For an Obama-friendly rebuttal of *Hype*, see Wilson (2008).

anarchist. As *USA Today* noted, the documentary 'explores the Ayers-Obama connection and questions whether Obama can unite the country' (Keen 2008). *Hype* and similar efforts ensured that the issue of Obama's radical past would be widely and repeatedly discussed on cable news and in newspapers (including the *New York Times*), though it ultimately failed to gain traction.¹⁹

In addition, Citizens United released two issue-related documentaries. The first was *We Have The Power: Solutions to Make America Energy Independent*, hosted by Newt and Callista Gingrich, based on the book *Drill Here, Drill Now, Pay Less: A Handbook for Slashing Gas Prices and Solving Our Energy Crisis*, which was authored by Newt Gingrich and Vince Haley. These both came out in September 2008 and addressed a major theme of the McCain campaign, though neither book nor film became a significant factor in the election. *We Have The Power* had its only theatrical screening at the Cobb Galleria Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, on Saturday, 27 September. The second documentary was *Blocking 'The Path To 9/11': The Anatomy of a Smear*, in which director John Ziegler took on the Clintons and the 'liberal media' that protested the depiction of President Clinton in the two-part Disney mini-series *The Path To 9/11* (2006). It was released in early October 2008 to almost no attention (Lowry 2008). One suspects that it was undertaken while Hillary Clinton was the likely Democratic nominee. Nevertheless, Bossie could boast of having released four feature-length political documentaries during the 2008 presidential campaign, rivalling Greenwald's track record four years earlier.

Robert Greenwald, Brave New Films and the 2008 election

While Bossie tried to act like a conservative version of Michael Moore or Robert Greenwald, both Moore and Greenwald carefully reassessed what they had been doing in the light of Kerry's defeat, the current political climate and the changing media landscape. Moore not only dropped *Fahrenheit 9/11 and ½*, he released *Sicko*, his first documentary after *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in 2007. Presumably, he found it more productive to release a film about healthcare in a non-election year when it would not be immediately linked to partisan electoral politics. Similarly, Greenwald did not make a single feature-length documentary during the 2008 election cycle. Greenwald's Brave New Films, however, did distribute one: Michael Moore's *Slacker Uprising* (2008), shown at the Toronto Film Festival in 2007 as *Captain Mike Across America*. Shot during the 2004 election, *Slacker Uprising* follows some musicians, a few comics and Moore, who were staging a succession of campaign rallies in a 62-cities, swing-state tour. It was a 'shadow campaign' – for Kerry or rather against Bush – where the performers were not politicians or traditional candidate surrogates. The targeted audiences for the rallies were generally young voters. According to one of the film's introductory titles, it 'is the story of one film-maker's failed attempt to turn things around'. Offering songs and mock Swift Boat ads that suggest Kerry was a coward because he did not get himself killed, the concerts mixed Moore's strong political viewpoint with humor.

Slacker Uprising never went into theatres but was available for downloading in Canada and the United States – and went straight to DVD. As a

result, it never received the regular film reviews one would expect from the *New York Times* and other traditional print media and went relatively unnoticed. Moore bought back the North American rights to *Slacker Uprising* from the Weinstein Company and for a limited time offered it for free on the Internet, beginning 23 September 2008. 'The only return any of us are hoping for is the largest turnout of young voters ever at the polls in November', Moore declared. 'I think "Slacker Uprising" will inspire millions to get off the couch and give voting a chance. This is a gift to my fans, and gifts should be free. Blip.tv and Brave New Films are great partners for us'.²⁰ Moore and Brave New Films also utilized the house-party idea. According to one source, 'The Internet community is invited to participate in the "Night of a Thousand House Parties", planned for Oct. 4, when local neighborhood screenings are supposed to take place across the nation'.²¹ The DVD of *Slacker Uprising*, complete with a variety of extras, was then released on 7 October for \$9.95 (Garner 2008).

Assuming that Moore and Greenwald are savvy politicians who calculate the bottom line by considering a number of factors, why did they do what they did? First, just as Greenwald had developed a reverse platform and sold DVDs of *Outfoxed* before putting the documentary into theatres, Brave New Films did much the same thing with *Slacker Uprising*. Free downloads would sell the film to those who would buy it on DVD for whatever reason – including generational preference and the desire to own an object for a relatively modest cost. Second, *Fahrenheit 9/11* had become a polarizing documentary and Moore must have recognized that if he had made *Fahrenheit 9/11* and $\frac{1}{2}$ in 2008, his critics were ready to pounce. Third and perhaps most importantly, *Slacker Uprising* was out of sync with the times. If Kerry had won, *Slacker Nation* would have served a different purpose and found an audience still celebrating a Kerry victory and Bush defeat. In 2008 it was old news, virtually a historical document. Downloadable for free and straight to DVD, the film was assessed within a less critical framework – as a minor work in Moore's oeuvre (and so avoided a dilution of the Moore brand name).

Brave New Films avoided taking sides in the 2008 Democratic primaries and focused, instead, on the likely Republican candidate(s). In late January 2007, the organization launched a new website, TheRealMcCain.com, with the 2:50 (minutes:seconds) *John McCain vs. John McCain* video, which depicts McCain flip-flopping on various issues. It eventually received over 1,500,000 viewings.²² Greenwald reported, 'We at Brave New Films are becoming increasingly concerned that the real John McCain story is not being told. Many in the media are in love with the "maverick" despite his changing positions, and obvious political pandering. We HAVE to do something about this! So we did some extensive research on his flip-flopping, and can now proudly present: *John McCain vs. John McCain*' (Greenwald 2007). Again, the film-makers sought to go under the celebrity label of 'maverick', and show what was overlooked or hidden by the mainstream media – thus revealing the 'real' or 'true' McCain.

The most watched Real McCain video was the 3:14 *John McCain's YouTube Problem Just Became a Nightmare*, uploaded on 18 May 2008. The video juxtaposes a number of news clips to demonstrate that McCain made assertions that were either outright lies or showed a profound lack of

20. 'Brave New Films and Michael Moore Release Feature Film "Slacker Uprising" Exclusively Online', press release, blip.tv, 23 September 2008. See also Stelter (2008).

21. 'Michael Moore Releases Slacker Uprising Online, For Free', About.com Documentaries, 6 September 2008, <http://documentaries.about.com/b/2008/09/06/michael-moore-releases-slacker-uprising-online-for-free.htm>.

22. *John McCain vs. John McCain*, YouTube, uploaded 26 January 2007, 1,576,675 viewings when accessed (5 July 2009).

23. *John McCain's YouTube Problem Just Became a Nightmare* had been viewed 8,765,851 when accessed (23 April 2009).
24. <http://therealmccain.com>. Accessed 25 March 2009.
25. 'The Real McCain'. <http://bravenewfilms.org/blog/?p=468>. Schecter did not publicly associate his book with the McCain website to which he contributed, so it was not explicitly a companion book to the website.

understanding about the issue he was discussing. McCain's claim that it was safe to visit a Baghdad market is countered by the statement that he was guarded by over 100 soldiers and three helicopters. On 17 October, more than two weeks before the election, Brave New Films announced that the viral video had

[...] just passed the 7 million view mark! An astonishing number, considering we only launched this video back in May. It is currently #14 on YouTube's all-time most watched list of News and Politics videos; by comparison, Will.I.Am's "Yes We Can" is #6, Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech is #30, and way way down at #82 is Newt Gingrich's "Drill Here, Drill Now" lecture. (The McCain campaign's own videos don't even crack the top 100, though Sarah Palin's gaffe-ridden CBS interview is down at the bottom of the list.)

(Brave New Films 2008)

By Election Day *John McCain's YouTube Problem* had been viewed roughly 8.5 million times.²³

Brave New Films continued to produce viral videos with running times of around three minutes. Robert Greenwald characterized their efforts as follows:

The REAL McCain offered an accurate portrayal of Senator John McCain, which the corporate media repeatedly failed to provide throughout the 2008 election. This series featured 17 videos that received over 18 million views. The videos tackled every issue from McCain's out-of-touch stance on the economy to his refusal to support the GI Bill. Some of the subjects included McCain's many multimillion dollar mansions (too many for him to count), releasing health records, fear-mongering about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his politics of hate, the lobbyists in his campaign, and his bigoted spiritual guide Rod Parsley.

Watch the videos that swept the Internet.²⁴

McCain's Mansions: The Houses That Greed Built, uploaded on 17 August 2008, had over 600,000 viewings. People did not know 'the real McCain' – a man who had ten houses, flew on private jets and favoured tax cuts for wealthy people like himself (Greenwald 2008). Again, *John McCain: Economic Disaster* documents McCain's advocacy for less regulation before the current economic disaster and then reversing himself as the costs of his small government philosophy become clear. Uploaded on 30 September, it had over 400,000 YouTube viewings by the election.

These hard-hitting mini-documentaries were part of Brave New Films' first viral video campaign. When the new *TheRealMcCain.com* website was launched, Greenwald announced that 'you'll also find a scathing new blog penned by top McCain watcher and fellow hellraiser, Cliff Schecter'.²⁵ Schecter soon left Brave New Films to publish his book *The Real McCain: Why Conservatives Don't Trust Him – And Why Independents Shouldn't*. Although ZP Heller subsequently took on much of the load, the Real McCain blog had a number of contributors, including Greenwald himself. As the campaign season heated up, multiple daily postings

became common. These routinely integrated commentary with videos from a wide range of sources. For instance, on 18 October 2008, ZP Heller had three postings: (1) *McCain Campaign: 'Real Virginia' Is 'Southern In Nature'*, (2) *Letterman Confronts McCain on Gordon Liddy Ties*, and (3) *McCain Care Leaves Seniors Behind*. The first posting included a clip from MSNBC in which McCain spokeswoman, Nancy Pfotenhauer, argued that the liberal suburbs of northern Virginia were not part of the real Virginia.²⁶ The second relocated an excerpt of McCain's 16 October appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, while the third offered a campaign ad from the Service Employees International Union about healthcare.²⁷ Heller's task often involved searching YouTube for appropriate videos to post to the Real McCain blog and then adding some contextual commentary.

Brave New Films also made videos critical of other Republican candidates. Three were made for 'The Real Rudy' campaign, launched with *The REAL Rudy: Command Center* (7:08), posted on 6 September 2007. These three videos – each five–seven minutes – challenged the image of Rudy Giuliani as the hero of 9/11. The third and last video, *Rudy Giuliani Abandons 9/11 Heroes*, was posted on 5 January 2008. By then it was becoming clear that Giuliani would not be the Republican nominee. Brave New Films also launched another viral video campaign, 'Fox Attacks: They Distort, We Reply' (<http://foxattacks.com/>). By repeatedly demonstrating that Fox News' many 'Fair and Balanced' assertions were not true, these short videos effectively updated Greenwald's documentary *OutFoxed*. Brave New Films' first video for this video campaign was the 3:27 *Fox Attacks Obama*, which distilled the name-calling and rhetorical strategies that O'Reilly & Co. used to malign Barack Obama. They labelled him the 'black candidate', insisted that he was educated as a child in an Islamic school or madrasa, evoked his middle name Hussein and mocked him as a closet smoker. *Fox Attacks Obama* was posted just eleven days after Obama had declared his candidacy, and to date has had just under three million viewings.²⁸ The video was designed not to endorse Obama, but rather to stop Fox from hosting a presidential debate sponsored by the Nevada State Democratic Party. In this Brave New Films succeeded. Greenwald explained this success as follows: 'It's the video, it's the website, it's the organizations, it's the bloggers and it's the grass roots. [When] you bring them together in a short time with no money spent on traditional publicity, you can reach millions of people and that's an exciting positive model going forward with activism'.²⁹ The numerous videos that followed in this series includes the 3:26 *Fox Attacks: Black America*, the 2:29 *Fox Attacks the Environment*, the 2:20 *Fox Attacks! Edwards and Obama*, and the 3:06 *Sorry Fox, We Won't Let You Trash Michelle Obama*.³⁰ These mini-documentaries were quick and effective responses to Fox News channel's efforts to undermine progressive Democratic candidates and to reshape the grounds on which the elections would be contested.

Although Brave New Films did not produce any feature documentaries in 2008, this does not mean that the company abandoned the documentary form for the longer term. After the election Brave New Films began work on *Rethink Afghanistan*, 'our newest full-length documentary, released

26. *McCain Campaign: 'Real Virginia' Is 'Southern In Nature'* has since been removed for copyright violation.
27. 'McCain Care Leaves Seniors Behind,' posted by SEIU on 7 October 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G130votm_5Q&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fuser%2FSEIU&feature=player_profilepage, with 531 views when accessed (31 July 2009), posted by bravenewfilms on 20 October 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNxyvmvmXr8>, with 27,111 views when accessed (31 July 2008).
28. *Fox Attacks Obama*, posted 21 February 2007 by bravenewfilms, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouKJixL-ms>, 2,944,483 views when accessed (31 July 2009).
29. *Fox Attacks Behind the Scenes*, posted 26 April 2007 by bravenewfilms.
30. *Fox Attacks: Black America*, posted 13 March 2007 by bravenewfilms, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY04glruZ4E>, 1,414,740 views when accessed (1 August 2009); *Fox Attacks the Environment*, posted 9 July 2007 by bravenewfilms, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnt3FWToSWs>, 499,254 views when accessed (1 August 2009); *Fox Attacks! Edwards and Obama*, posted 19 December 2007 by bravenew-

films, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Yp-MeXSysE>, 224,638 views when accessed (1 August 2009); *Sorry Fox, We Won't Let You Trash Michelle Obama*, posted 9 July 2008 by bravenewfilms, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ_kR8nP1Tc, 624,181 views when accessed (1 August 2009).

31. 'Brave New Films Videos: Rethink Afghanistan', <http://bravenewfilms.org/videos/rethinkafghanistan>. Accessed 23 April 2009; 'Campaign: Rethink Afghanistan', posted by ZP Heller on 5 February 2009, <http://bravenewfilms.org/blog/?p=68784>. Accessed 5 July 2009.
32. *Afghanistan + More Troops = Catastrophe (Full Video)*, posted 25 February 2009 by bravenewfilms, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPUwQGmMSm0>, 45,565 viewings when accessed (5 July 2009).
33. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4teQ_XDtKIk. Accessed 23 April 2009.
34. 'Afghanistan + More Troops = Catastrophe', Brave New Films, 26 February 2009, <http://bravenewfilms.org/blog/?p=69276>. Accessed 16 April 2009.
35. *David Bossie on Hollywood Politics*, posted by citizensunited on 21 February 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ChNbVvVp4k>, 321 views when accessed (12 July 2009).

in segments online for free'.³¹ The first 11:40 segment, *Rethink Afghanistan: Troops* was uploaded in late February 2009 and in less than two months had over 42,000 viewings.³² Two other segments followed. The 14-minute *Rethink Afghanistan (Part 3): Cost of War* was uploaded on 14 April and within two days had over 5000 viewings. A week later it had just under 10,000.³³ Greenwald, who went to Afghanistan to make the documentary remarked:

I realize this war is an incredibly hairy issue. It has folks on the left divided, particularly in the progressive blogosphere, and it's important to be able to debate the issues surrounding this war. After all, that's the kind of plurality of opinion Obama has called for and respects and is willing to listen to – how refreshing! What is not debatable, at least in my mind, is the need for congressional oversight.³⁴

Even when media mavens such as Greenwald returned to documentary film-making after the election, YouTube and the Internet had fundamentally reshaped the ways in which they were delivering their work.

YouTube, Citizens United and the future

Although Brave New Films put time, money and energy into generating effective viral video campaigns, the same cannot be said for Citizens United. Citizens United started its site *citizensunited* on 29 October 2006, six months after Brave New Films. The oldest video still on the Citizens United site is the 6:00 *David Bossie on Hollywood Politics*, a clip from *FOX and Friends* (the morning talk show on the Fox News Channel), in which he is introduced as 'the producer of *Celsius 41.11* which refuted the content of Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11*'. He is one of two 'experts' (the other is critic Michael Medved) criticizing Robert Redford. The video was viewed just over 300 times.³⁵ Two days later, perhaps because of this plug, Citizens United posted *Trailer for Celsius 41.11*.³⁶ They also posted a backlog of other video clips including *Dick Morris on Hillary's Presidential Announcement (Part 1)* and *David Bossie on the Mark Foley Scandal*.³⁷ Citizens United also posted two 'pro-war' TV spots from early 2003: *Fred Thompson, Soldier* and *Fred Thompson, Courage*.³⁸ After posting 27 videos in its first month, *citizensunited* then stopped. Bossie then rejoined YouTube by creating another 'channel', *citizensunited07*, with 28 videos currently on the site, the oldest being *Hillary the Movie Trailer*, posted on 20 December 2007.³⁹ In contrast to these 55 video postings, Brave New Films has 386 on its *bravenewfilms* channel and 107 and 30 videos on two affiliated channels, *bravenewfoundation* and *rethinkafghanistan*. *Bravenewfilms* also has 32,485 subscribers while *citizensunited07* has only 226. Clearly Citizens United has placed little emphasis on this aspect of new media, preferring to focus on more traditional media forms such as television spots, books, and feature-length documentaries on DVD. Certainly, it has used YouTube to promote its documentaries and also to make them available in ten-minute chunks. Although Citizens United has a well-developed website, this too lacks a sustained commitment to video streaming and file sharing. Its 'multimedia' section offers only fifteen videos and links to a number of these items are no longer available.

Since the election, Citizens United has had three major initiatives. First, it has a monthly newsletter, *The Obama Biden Watch* (<http://www.obamabidenwatch.org/>), which

[...] will be produced by the same relentless investigators and researchers who brought you the critically acclaimed Clinton Watch during the scandal-plagued 1990s. Whether it's broken promises, scandals, or the same old failed liberal policies, we aim to keep you in the loop. We hope you keep coming back for more!

(*The Obama Biden Watch* 2009)

Its first issue in January 2009 it complained that Obama's Inaugural address 'seemed to wander. It was decidedly short on the specifics of change, other than plans for dramatic increases in domestic spending and a larger government to carry out the new programs in energy, infrastructure, science, education, health care, and global warming' (*The Obama Biden Watch* 2009). Second, Citizens United is seeking to overturn the restrictions that curtailed its ability to advertise *Hillary: The Movie* on television. The case, Citizens United vs. The Federal Election Commission, is being considered by the Supreme Court of the United States. Finally, Citizens United continues to make documentaries and has released two since the election. David Bossie and Kevin Knoblock produced *Rendezvous with Destiny: Ronald Reagan*, which is narrated by Newt and Callista Gingrich. It had its premiere at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, on 6 February 2009 – less than three weeks after Obama's inauguration (McCain 2009). This was followed by *Perfect Valor*, narrated by Fred Thompson, which premiered on 16 May at the GI Film Festival in Washington, DC, and was awarded the 'best feature documentary'. Whatever one's evaluation of the programming being put out by Citizens United, Bossie has clearly become the leading producer of right-wing, feature-length documentaries.

Documentaries and the 2008 election

Although Bossie and Greenwald (as well as Michael Moore) are central to the story of the political/social-issue documentary during the 2008 election, their activities need to be set in the context of other significant work released during the presidential primaries and fall campaign. While there were no equivalents to *Fahrenheit 9/11* in movie theatres in 2008, there was one commercially successful documentary: *Religulous*, featuring Bill Maher and directed by Larry Charles, who also directed Sacha Baron Cohen in *Borat* (2006) and *Brüno* (2009). *Screen Daily* called it, 'a consistently funny if one-sided putdown of society's blind devotion to its many religious faiths' (Grierson 2008). Although its satire was occasionally directed at the political right, Obama and Clinton were both running faith-friendly campaigns; its iconoclasm thus worked systematically against the grain of the political season. (When promoting his documentary, Maher acknowledged that Obama professed himself a man of faith but quipped: 'I hope he's lying' (Bonnell 2008).) Perhaps for this reason, the film did remarkably well at the box office, opening on 1 October in 502 theatres and grossing over \$3.4 million its first weekend. By the end of 2008, its

36. *Trailer for Celsius 41.11*, posted 23 February 2007 by citizensunited, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pP6y-Inwv50, 5576 views when accessed (12 July 2009).
37. *Dick Morris on Hillary's Presidential Announcement (Part 1)*, posted 23 February 2007 (originally broadcast 22 January 2007) by citizensunited, 1298 views when accessed (12 July 2009). *David Bossie on the Mark Foley Scandal*, posted 14 March 2007 by citizensunited, 137 views when accessed (12 July 2009). The clip was described as 'Citizens United President David N. Bossie discusses the Sandy Berger case on Tucker, October 3 2006.
38. *Fred Thompson, Soldier*, posted 27 February 2007 by citizensunited, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq9FH-HjllEyo>, 68,091 views when accessed 1 August 2009; *Fred Thompson, Courage*, posted 27 February 2007 by citizensunited, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AUOgDRSwNY>, 17,980 views when accessed 1 August 2009. For info on this campaign see, Liza Porteus, "'Pro-War' Movement Springs Into Action", 2 March 2003.
39. <http://www.youtube.com/user/citizensunited07>. Accessed 12 July 2009.

40. 'Religulous', <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=religulous.htm>; and 'Documentary', <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>. Accessed 8 July 2009.

domestic gross exceeded \$13 million, making it the seventh top-grossing documentary of all time in the United States.⁴⁰

There were a few documentaries that tried to address important issues that were potentially relevant to the election. Patrick Creadon's *I.O.U.S.A* (2008) looked at the emerging financial crisis and featured former US Comptroller General, David Walker. Premiering at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, it began to appear in theatres in the fall. Serious and bipartisan, it was lost in the election brouhaha. Iraq might have remained a potent issue in 2008, and two film-makers made important documentaries that examined relevant aspects of the 'war on terror': Alex Gibney with *Taxi to the Darkside* (2007) and Errol Morris with *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008). These films showed that the United States had become a terrorist state and that we were at war with ourselves. Neither film did well at the box office. The issue further lost its relevance to the campaign when the Republicans nominated John McCain, who had often opposed the Bush administration's propensity to use torture.

Other film-makers made a handful of documentaries with the 2008 presidential election explicitly in mind. Two looked back on the 2004 election: Katy Chevigny's *Election Day* (2007) and John Ennis's *Free for All!* (2008). *Election Day* explored the voting process from a variety of perspectives as half a dozen camera crews shot in different parts of the country on Election Day 2004. Chevigny, who used a cinema verité approach, certainly encountered some of the issues around voter suppression, and while it inspired viewers to vote, the film – to its credit – is essentially non-partisan. Ennis's documentary looked at voter fraud in Florida (2000) and Ohio (2004) in an effort to forestall a third such occurrence. As such it reworked the key themes of earlier documentaries such as *Unprecedented* and *Counting on Democracy*.

The 2008 US presidential elections saw several significant shifts and developments when it came to political and social issue documentary, which historically has been constituted as a liberal-leftist formation. Progressive film-makers pursued a double movement. First, rather than make feature films that directly attacked the Republican candidates, they moved these activities to the Internet, where these efforts were articulated through short-form non-fiction videos. Second, these film-makers certainly continued to make feature-length, issue-oriented documentaries, but avoided releasing important documentary work during the presidential election. Moore, for instance, released *Capitalism: A Love Story* in late 2009. The appearance of a wave of documentaries about the environment at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival – for more general release later in the year – similarly suggests that many film-makers have decided that elections are not the best time to discuss the nuances of important issues (Cieply 2009). Conservative media-makers took the opposite tack. David Bossie was eager to challenge the left-leaning hegemony of documentary and effectively did in 2008 what Robert Greenwald had done in 2004. The four documentaries produced by Citizens United in 2008 had little visibility or impact on the election, but this may have been due to circumstances (the economic crisis, a weak Republican candidate, general dissatisfaction with Bush and the Republican Party, the intervention of the FEC). Significantly, the only documentary to succeed at the box office was humorous and mocked a belief shared by all the candidates – religious faith.

For all their differences, both Greenwald and Bossie shared a rhetorical trope. Both claimed to offer a true or truer representation as opposed to the false and alluring image created by the candidate and an enamoured, unreliable media. By going underneath the superficial and deceptive image projected by the mainstream media, these 'independent' film-makers (on either the left or right) sought to show what was overlooked or hidden. By showing what they considered important but unexamined aspects of the candidates' histories, they claimed to show the 'real' or true McCain', 'the shocking truth about Hillary Clinton', and 'the truth [about Obama] rather than the fantasy created by a compliant – even corrupt – news media' (Kouri 2008). Although the media landscape may have changed radically in just four years, this rhetoric trope was a constant from the 2004 election.

YouTube and other video sharing/video streaming Internet sites transformed the media landscape in ways that profoundly affected documentary practice and perhaps even made the rhetorical tropes of truth less central. Of course, YouTube became a site for trailers and even the posting of long-form documentaries in successive segments (e.g. *Hillary: The Movie*). Other websites offered downloads of documentaries (e.g. *Slacker Nation*) sometimes for free – or for a modest fee. But the Internet provided more than an efficient and accessible means of distributing media content. It has not only generated new relationships between content producers and audiences, but new Internet-specific forms such as blogs that have come to incorporate moving image material into the text. Some genres have been revived or reinvented: campaign videos by the candidates' organizations flourished: by Election Day, barakobama.com had 1821 videos posted on YouTube while JohnMcCain.com had 330. Some of these can be properly characterized as operating within the documentary tradition. YouTube also fostered a wide variety of user-generated content that had an attenuated relation to documentary.

Arguably, the media content that defined the election on YouTube was neither documentary nor non-fiction forms that were part of the discourse of sobriety (to use Bill Nichols' phrase) (Nichols 1991, Casetti 2008). It was the music video! YouTube music videos such as will.i.am's *Yes I Can* – which has been viewed more than 18 million times since its posting on YouTube on 2 February 2008 – became a privileged way to express political sentiment and fit well with Obama's message of hope and a better future. ObamaSongs, blogging on Daily Kos, identified 659 different Obama songs by early September 2008 and 1108 songs by Election Day, 4 November (ObamaSongs 2008a; 2008b). Of the 659 songs, 108 of them were of non-US origin and came from 34 different countries: seventeen from Jamaica, fourteen from Germany, twelve from England, five from Belgium, four each from Kenya, Ireland and India, and two each from Japan, Hong Kong, the Congo and Columbia. People from around the world posted their music videos on YouTube, turning the election into a global event. One must ask, to what extent did such a utopic impulse, expressed through such Internet-facilitated forms as these musical videos, contend with and even marginalize the too-familiar political rhetoric of truth. We might even consider the ways in which Bill Maher's *Religulous* and the many cats/dogs-for-Obama videos also shared this utopic impulse. And

41. *Pets for Obama*, posted 1 February 2008 by blessthe-dogs, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhuZxXoiAs>, 7449 views when accessed (9 August 2009).

finally, the ways in which Obama's candidacy benefited from an integration of these two tendencies.

YouTube effectively acted as an audio-visual library and archival record (though an unstable one) during the presidential campaign. In this role, it also encouraged sampling and exploration by its users. Viewers might have planned to watch a particular video, but in the process of their search they were likely to view others by the same subscriber or on the same topic – including those with an opposing point of view. The YouTube–Google search engine encouraged active and playful investigation into which viewers had a wide range of entry points. In the process, users were almost certain to find remarkable videos that would surprise, delight and/or offend. They might start by seeking out the truth behind McCain's maverick image but end up viewing *Pets for Obama* – perhaps while wondering what the brave new media formation of 2012 will look like.⁴¹

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